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ABSTRACT

This digest briefly summarizes the literature on preparing educators to promote the success of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students. Success in Native terms means not only academic achievement but also the development of the whole person. Spirituality and reciprocity (giving back to others) are vital to Indian learning. Teachers must be prepared to present European American paradigms such that they can coexist with Native world views about life's complex interconnections between people and nature. Place-based education can help students connect with their local community and geography. It is critical that teachers of AI/AN children work with students' extended families to enlist their support for literacy and academic achievement; reinforce their efforts to pass on their culture; and help their children develop a strong and resilient identity. Community partnerships can provide much-needed support as well as AI/AN role models who demonstrate the achievement of educational success without cultural loss. Teaching styles common in American schools often fail to meet the needs of AI/AN students. Generally, books on Indian education call for teacher preparation that leads to a constructivist and experiential approach centered on the community and environment. Recommendations for research-based content of specialized AI/AN teacher training programs are listed. (Contains 15 references.) (SV)

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Don Trent Jacobs and Jon Reyhner

January 2002

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Preparing Teachers to Support American Indian and Alaska Native Student Success and Cultural Heritage

Don Trent Jacobs and Jon Reyhner

This Digest briefly summarizes literature related to preparing educators to bring about American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) student success and discusses what *success* in life means for Indian students of all ages and their extended families. We draw our information from both Native and non-Native sources, with the idea that educators need to prepare AI/AN students to live in and give back to both local and global communities.

Nearly 30 years after Fuchs and Havighurst concluded that schools "should follow the Indian voice" (1973, p. 306), Deloria and Wildcat echo the idea that Indian education must become a process "that moves within the Indian context and does not try to avoid or escape this context" (2001, p. 85). This is the expressed, yet unmet, goal of the federal government's policy of Indian self-determination, one that shapes the content of this Digest, which is in two parts. The first part points to the goals of Indian education, and the second part focuses on how to reach them.

Valuing Interconnectedness

High expectations. Too often student success is defined in terms of test scores. While not discounting academic achievement, traditional expectations for AI/AN learning involve the whole child. Although the Indian voice differs some from one community to the next, Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern, in *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future* (1990), describe a model for expectancy patterned after accumulated American Indian wisdom that, although intended for "at-risk" learners, seems especially applicable to AI/AN children. They challenge traditional Western expectations relating to learning theories, discipline, youth empowerment, and school structure. Like Jacobs and Jacobs-Spencer's *Teaching Virtues* (2000), it brings virtues such as courage and generosity back into the education equation, not as behavioral tools, but as a way to give meaning to academic mastery and enhance social responsibility. These two books offer an American Indian and Alaska Native perspective that supports a *democratic consequences* model of classroom management as described by McEwan (2000).

Values and reciprocal contributions. Many publications address the fact that spirituality and reciprocity (giving back to others) are vital to Indian learning, and more and more educators believe, in the words of Slattery (1995, p. 79), that "curriculum must include the wisdom embedded in Native American spirituality." New books such as *Ecology, Spirituality, and Education: Curriculum for Relational Knowing* (Riley-Taylor, in press) are evidence that Slattery's call is being heard. American Indian voices speaking on AI/AN spirituality are found in Deloria and Wildcat's *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (2001). In examining the issues facing Native students, they write how teachers must be prepared so Western (European American) paradigms can coexist with Native worldviews about life's complex interconnections among peoples and with nature. They focus especially on the need to relate to one's local community and geography, an approach to learning referred to as "place-based education," a relatively new term for how American Indians traditionally viewed teaching and learning.

Since most teachers of AI/AN students are non-Indian (Pavel, 1999), it would be helpful if teach candidates planning to teach AI/AN students learned at least some of the spiritual traditions of the local population. Teachers can support parent and community teachings, realizing that "book knowledge," while having its place, should not thoughtlessly supplant the "collective wisdom" learned through the ages and passed on to each new generation by elders. Teachers cannot be expected to carry the major responsibility for facilitating the development of Native identity, but they can honor the important contributions of families and elders. To the degree that spirituality represents the sense that all things are related, educators must also work carefully to address racism issues in the classroom, a subject addressed well by Cleary and Peacock (1998).

Family support and role models to provide student motivation. It is critical that teachers of AI/AN children work with students' extended families to enlist their support for literacy and academic achievement; reinforce their efforts to pass on their culture; and help their children develop a strong, resilient, and caring identity. American Indian and Alaska Native families, reacting to assimilationist pressures in schools, can hurt their children by creating in them ambivalent attitudes toward schooling (Peshkin, 1997) or even antischool "oppositional" identities (Ogbu, 1995). Teachers should realize that however culturally sensitive they might be, students can react to them as members of a group that often has proven to be insensitive. While educators must work on changing schools to be more welcoming of AI/AN students' languages and cultures, they also need to work with American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Through community partnerships AI/AN students can, as a group, succeed academically and overcome obstacles that may be placed in their way. Prospective teachers also can learn how to utilize organizations such as the American Indian Science and Engineering Society, which can provide support programs and AI/AN role models who prove educational success can be achieved without cultural loss.

Effective Pedagogy and Curriculum

Languages, cultures, and bicultural adaptation. Currently, many AI/AN groups are becoming more aware that, if they do not do something immediately to stem the loss of their languages and cultures, they will be lost forever. Non-Indian teachers will not be able to do much about language loss but can contribute much by learning a few key phrases and otherwise giving respect to the importance of culture and language. Schools, such as Rock Point

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Community School in the Navajo Nation, that nurture bilingual and bicultural perspectives have shown improvements in learning environments and academic success (McLaughlin, 1992). Also by learning how to provide place- and community-based curriculum and instruction, teachers can provide students with a relevant, practical, and motivating education where, in the words of Corson (1998), Indigenous learners can actively participate in shaping their own education.

Pedagogy and curriculum. Cleary and Peacock (1998) found that teaching styles common in American schools often fail to meet the needs of AI/AN students. Many studies have found that classrooms across the United States are characterized by teacher-centered direct instruction where students are expected to sit quietly and listen to their teacher or do seat work, except when called upon by their teacher to answer questions (Lipka & Mohatt, 1998). While highly motivated students can do relatively well in such classrooms, students who may question why they are even sitting in a classroom can rebel.

Generally, books on Indian education (e.g., Reyhner, 1992) call for teacher preparation that leads to a constructivist and experiential approach that is both community- and environment-centered. This allows students a more active role in their own education. In *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* (1994), Gregory Cajete concludes that "a primary orientation of Indigenous education is that each person is their own teacher and learning is connected to each individual's life process." However, this does not mean that teachers do not also need strong preparation in the subject matter they plan to teach (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

Native teacher education programs. The vision statement for Oglala Lakota College's teacher preparation program reads,

> To graduate highly qualified, professional, motivated, committed teachers who possess and who will teach Wolakota in a multicultural, changing world. (Wolakota refers to the whole person in balance and in harmony spiritually, physically, mentally and socially.)[1]

Similarly, the University of Alaska's Cross-Cultural Education Development (X-CED) Program, founded a quarter century ago, is a field-based teacher training program that believes "traditional cultures face a series of modern choices" and Yup'ik teachers act as cultural brokers "negotiating a curriculum with the help of both village elders and outside facilitators such as the professors in the X-CED program" (Lipka & Mohatt, 1998, pp. 26-27). Both of these programs also provide critical follow-up support to their graduates once they start teaching.

Conclusion

Discussing the views of one of the many teachers they interviewed, Cleary and Peacock sum up their research:

> The key to producing successful American Indian students in our modern educational system . . . is to first ground these students in their American Indian belief and value systems. (1998, p. 101)

Reyhner, Lee, and Gabbard (1993) describe research-based content for specialized American Indian and Alaska Native teacher training programs that includes

- anthropological, sociological, and historical foundations of American Indian and Alaska Native education
- culturally responsive, bilingual, and ESL instructional methodologies
- guidance on how to "Nativize" curriculum to reflect the American Indian and Alaska Native experience
- learning through internships in American Indian and Alaska Native communities

While that content is a start, the goal of teacher education is to produce teachers who do not disempower AI/AN students and who prepare them to move comfortably among different cultures while valuing the unique cultural assumptions of their home, community, and heritage.

[1]Oglala Lakota College. (2001). *Oglala Lakota College catalog 2000-2001.* Kyle, SD: Author. (p. 79)

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